

ALL THINGS BRIGHT AND BEAUTIFUL  
Genesis 1:27-31  
September 10, 1978

John M. Buchanan  
Broad Street Presbyterian Church  
Columbus, Ohio

According to the media, there were more Americans overseas this summer than ever, except in war time. You may have heard that the Buchanans were among them. What was unusual about our experiences was that we went to live in Moffat, Scotland, as a family - to live as Scots for eight weeks; and I was given the privilege of practicing my ministry among the people of St. Andrew's Parish Church. We were tourists, to be sure - but we were very aware that we represented you: everything we did, what we ate for breakfast, what newspapers we read, the way we related to one another, was a matter of close scrutiny with the Scots. And because I am a minister I was granted immediate access to the deepest concerns and hopes and disappointments and joys of people who soon became very dear friends.

I am aware that Americans do not come to church on a warm September morning to hear a travelogue, but I found it quite impossible to ignore the summer as I prepared this sermon. And the first order of business is to say "Thank you": to the staff - all of whom worked a little harder this summer to cover for me and to make life comfortable for the Reverend Gerald Moule, Minister of St. Andrew's, and his family: to those who entertained the Moules and made their stay in Columbus a memorable one: and to all the people of Broad Street Presbyterian Church who allowed their minister to be absent so long and to have this stimulating, challenging experience of a lifetime.

It is very good to be back. One of the distinct advantages of being away for an extended period of time is that when one returns the ordinary becomes unique, the everyday is suddenly interesting. We find ourselves still luxuriating in the comfort of American life, appreciating a bit more what all of us take for granted, and enjoying thoroughly the rich gift of friendship and affection.

We will live out of our experience for a long time to come. I trust that you will forgive me if I refer to Scotland on occasion and assume that I am not really name dropping but rather drawing on a very stimulating and thought provoking experience. This evening we will share the details of our summer in a more informal setting and we invite you to join us at 7:00 for dessert in the Dining Room.

My interest in Scotland is on three levels. First, in terms of my roots, Scotland is where both the Buchanans and the McCormicks originated. Second, in terms of history the Scots, and the Scotch-Irish, were among the first to come to the colonies. Some were Tories: most found the American Revolution more to their tastes. They left an indelible mark on the founding era of the American Republic. Third, in terms of theology, Scotland is the place where the ideas and constructs of John Calvin took root and grew into an institution. In a degree of intensity, violence and bloodshed that we now find almost embarrassing the Scots fought and died for matters such as the type of worship which would be held in their Kirk, whether communion would be celebrated kneeling or standing, or whether ministers would be appointed by the landed aristocracy or chosen by the people. It is the birthplace of Presbyterianism, and the Church of Scotland today remains resolutely the same. So, if one is interested in beginnings, there is no place on earth, at least for an American Presbyterian by the name of Buchanan, as significant as Scotland.

We fell in love with Moffat, a town of 2,500, fifty miles north of the English border; the same distance south of both Glasgow and Edinburgh. The countryside is rugged, steep, mostly barren and used mainly for sheep grazing. A statue of a ram stands proudly in The High Street, Moffat's main thoroughfare. Tourists by the

thousands stop at the Moffat Weavers for woolens and then drift into town for tea or lunch: the people of Moffat appreciate their money, tolerate their presence and look forward to September. Tourists, including Americans, are not ordinarily the most gracious representatives of their homelands. Moffat is just north of the Border Region where for centuries Scotsmen and English invaded, plundered, kidnapped and killed one another for the sheer joy of it, it seems. It is the heart of Covenanting Country, that radical Presbyterian movement that refused to acknowledge the authority of the Church of England, the Episcopacy and the Prayer Book. Two miles up a mountain, on a farm we visited, is a Preaching Rock, where the Covenanters gathered to worship, out of sight of English troops. Five miles north of town is a monument to a Covenanter who was shot. And directly across the street from St. Andrew's Church is the Black Bull Inn, established in 1545, the postal coach stop between Carlisle and Glasgow, where the infamous Graham of Claverhouse quartered his troops while hunting for Covenanters. Robert Burns frequented that tavern as well and once scratched a wee poem on a window glass there, it is told.

St Andrew's is the Parish Church, established to serve a geographical area. The people of the town regard it as their Kirk, even if they do not belong to it, or support it, in a way that is difficult for Americans to understand. It is there - as part of their heritage: it is as much a part of their establishment as the courts and schools. Worship is dignified, solemn, reverent: without printed materials or responses, or anything which might remind one of the formalized liturgies of Anglicanism or Roman Catholicism. And yet, the unwritten liturgy is rigid: five hymns, prayers, scripture, sermon - always in the same order. And while the Church of Scotland is working on liturgical renewal, one had the distinct sense that this is how God's people have been doing it for four hundred years and there had better be a rather compelling reason for changing anything. I was responsible for a special, community-wide service on a Sunday afternoon, and when I suggested that we might do something a little different, my colleagues looked at me quizzically and asked simply, "Why?"

The focal point of the Reformation was the preaching of the word and it still is at St Andrew's and throughout the Church of Scotland. The Beadle, a church officer, met me in the vestry for prayer, then ceremoniously carried the Bible to the pulpit, then returned to escort me to the pulpit, closing the pulpit door behind me - an eloquent expression of the expectations and priorities in the worship experience.

I preached on seven of eight Sundays at St. Andrew's at 11:00 and Wamphray, a small rural church, at 12:30. During the week I called on members, visited hospitals, nursing homes, did a little counseling, conducted a funeral and baptized a baby.

We travelled north to the Highlands, Kinlochleven to see old friends, Stirling, Buchanan Country around Loch Lomond, Buchanan Castle, Edinburgh, the ancient Abbeys of Melrose and Dryburgh. We saw seventh century Celtic Crosses, and sheep clipped in the same way as their ancestors have been clipped over the centuries. We took countless walks through gorgeous mountains, worshipped in the High Kirk of St. Giles in Edinburgh where John Knox preached, and saw where Mary, Queen of Scots, was born, married, reigned, and the room where her Italian secretary and confidant was murdered. We sailed to northern Ireland, drove to the Republic and stayed in the house where Matthew Kearney was born, farmed, and decided to come to America with his young bride, Fannie Montgomery - who died last week - and who, among other things, became the mother of my wife's father. We traveled to London, saw what people see in London; attended Evensong at St. Paul's: and, on the way home, stood in awe at the magnificent windows of Yorkminster.

On the first Sunday in Moffat, I was called on to award books and prizes to children of the Sunday School during worship. One of the hymns sung on the occasion was a favorite children's hymn in both Church of Scotland and Church of England, "All Things Bright and Beautiful". The tune is light, innocent, simple, much more lively than most - obviously a children's hymn.

"All things bright and beautiful  
All creatures great and small  
All things wise and wonderful -  
The Lord God made them all.  
Each little flower that opens  
Each little bird that sings  
He made their glowing colors  
He made their tiny wings."

Many of us are familiar with the words only because author James Herriot chose them for book titles for his very popular sequence about life as a veterinarian in the Yorkshire Dales. I confess that I had not heard the hymn before, and that, frankly, it felt a bit awkward, as it always does when adults try to sing like children. But then I had the privilege of hearing it sung as it was intended. I was invited to address five separate school assemblies and at each one, the children sang "All Things Bright and Beautiful". You haven't heard that hymn until you have heard it sung by dear Scottish Kindergartners. In that context, the power and profundity of what the hymn asserts came through to me -

"All things bright and beautiful...  
The Lord God made them all."

At the heart of all honest religion are three identifiable experiences or feelings. I have come to trust them as criteria for my own religious experience and practice...the feeling and experience of wonder...the feeling and experience of trust...the feeling and experience of love - for life, self and others.

The Scottish Kindergartners couldn't have expressed it academically, but they were, I felt, dealing with the most profound structures of the human spirit as they sang their little hymn. We can, I submit, learn a great deal from them.

*Debus* Years hence, the mid-twentieth century will be identified, I think, as the time when people stopped believing that God, if He exists at all, has anything whatever to do with the world. Theologically, it will be the time identified not as Death of God, but when men and women were forced to rethink, in altogether radical terms, the venerable doctrine of creation. For centuries Genesis 1 and 2 served well. Science, such as it was, assumed a stable, serene universe. Theology assumed a sovereign God whose handiwork could be seen in nature and whose will was clear in the fortunes of history. The scientific and technological revolution of our century has changed that fundamentally. The universe, it was discovered, is exploding outward at the speed of light. Life evolved through the process of natural selection and matter turned out to be not nearly as simple as everyone thought. God, somewhere in all of that, receded into the safety of theological abstraction or the irrelevant nostalgia of "Old-time religion". Thinking people were aware that the rules of the game had been changed essentially, and radically and ominously. In a very substantial recent work, University of Chicago theologian Langdon Gilkey writes: "The ordinary experience of contemporary men and women, and so the world they inhabit, possesses for most of us no transcendent dimension: the horizon of that experience seems closed or

cramped...What is real to most of us, and so alone effective, are only those natural or human factors." (Reaping the Whirlwind, p.137).

And yet, we live in a pivotal time, when thoughtful people, not comfortable with obsolete religious ideas, are realizing the inadequacy of secularism and there is a lot of drifting, treading water, theologically. Gian Carlo Menotti, composer of Amahl and the Night Visitors, mused in an interview recently about his own loss of faith..."I am definitely not a religious man. All the same I am haunted by religious problems. Why? I can hardly explain it to myself...I've lost my faith but it is a loss that makes me uneasy. I often feel like a runaway, who suddenly finds himself wondering if he has not left home too rashly or too soon." (Context, June 1, 1978).

Haunting religious questions are posed today, interestingly, not by the theologians but by their old nemesis, science. Time magazine did a feature article last week on Black Holes, those "bottomless pits in space into which matter simply disappears." In spite of itself, the magazine became theological by observing that the intense interest in the subject is due to the fact that "black holes mark the points when astrophysics intersects metaphysics and science finally converges with religion." Perhaps the experience of wonder and mystery and awe is not as obsolete as we thought. Perhaps the astrophysicist is the new priest leading the litany - "When I look at the heavens, the stars and the moon...O Lord, our Lord, how majestic is thy name..." or better yet, "All Things Bright and Beautiful."

The second construct of honest religion, so eloquently expressed by singing children, is trust: trust that the created order is essentially good: trust that the Genesis writer knew what he was about when he affirmed that God liked what He had made.

There is a lot about our common life that seems to deny that. There is a lot of warmed-over Greek dualism in our thinking that regards the created, physical order with suspicion. It is reflected in our notorious ambiguity about human sexuality, our distrust of sensual appetite of any form, our disregard of human life - whether in demeaning pornography or slick violence. It is reflected also in our irresponsible treatment of the world around us; the regrettable and thoroughly American refusal to take seriously the precarious balance of the ecosystem of which we are only one part. Our time is pivotal on this basic religious construct; the jury is still out and we could well be instructed by my wee friends in Scotland.

Finally, and related to both wonder and trust, honest religion has to do with the basic love of life which always includes love of self and love of others. Somewhere this too became a casualty of the twentieth century. In a New York Times Book Review recently novelist Eudora Welty was asked why younger writers seem to show so little love for the human species, and responded, "They tend to doubt the truth of something that doesn't hurt pretty badly; there's a sort of distressing feeling that if you admire or like something, there's a lie in it somewhere - either in it or in yourself - which is such a frightening prospect when you think of all that can be missed out of life if you can't embrace a little more of it than comes in through such a narrow squint-hole, like the leper's squint in a church."

Somewhere at the heart of honest religion is an unapologetic love of life, which includes the world, one's own life and the life of others. It is there, clearly, in Genesis, and there is nothing more sad nor more erroneous than religion that somehow manages to ignore or eliminate it, or worse yet, turn it upside down so thoroughly that life is hated. Gilkey calls it, in a very helpful phrase "the joy

in one's own being". There is no creativity, no music, no poetry, no deep love and honest laughter without an unapologetic joy about one's own being.

The Christian faith invites you to laugh and love who you are and to embrace the world. It invites you to experience a little mystical awe at the fact that you are. Or, as Pee Wee Reese, field captain of the Brooklyn Dodgers in the 1950's said twenty years later: "there were lotsa days when I'd run out onto the field and say, "Hey, Pee Wee, you're in the big leagues."

Jesus wanted desperately for His disciples to think like that. It's what He was telling them in that brief portion of the Sermon on the Mount we heard this morning. "Look at the birds of the air - Consider the lilies - are you not of more value than they?" Honest religion has at its heart the sense that we have been created by God, that we are loved by God, nothing will separate us from that love, and that - all things considered, that is very good news indeed.

It means including others in the picture as well. It means living as if God loves your neighbor as much as He loves you. It means rejoicing in the "essential being" of another as well as your own. It means seeing the common humanity, the hopes and loves and aspirations and disappointments of others and feeling them personally: the tomato pickers, for instance, the welfare recipient, the ghetto parent. It means living in love and good will and justice and equanimity with all the other children in God's family.

There is a lot we shall remember from this summer. Somewhere in it all will be a class of Scottish six year olds singing words which I commend to you very highly:

"All things bright and beautiful  
All creatures great and small  
All things wise and wonderful -  
The Lord God made them all."

Amen.

Almighty God, our Father, remind us that we are your creatures, the sheep of your hand. Free us to rejoice in who we are, to love you honestly and care for one another openly and compassionately. O God, we give thanks for your love, so evident in your whole creation; through Jesus Christ our Lord.

Amen.